

# A GLOBAL ISSUE

## BACKGROUNDER

**“Waste prevention is of paramount importance to curtail ever increasing waste quantities” —UNEP, 2015**

Waste is an urgent global issue; per capita waste generation has risen markedly in the past 50 years, roughly in step with rising income levels (UNEDP, 2015). And using this measure, Canada has one of the poorest ratings on record. Canadians produced the most garbage per capita when compared to 16 other OECD nations—a whopping 777 kilograms per person per year (Conference Board, 2013).

For decades, governments and others have focused on managing waste after it has already been created, making significant strides in recycling and disposal. Yet with 2.5 billion additional consumers expected to join the middle class by 2030, focusing only on maximizing end-of-pipe recycling and disposal will “forever be running to a standstill” unless we make significant progress in avoiding the creation of waste (UNEP, 2015).

We need a collective shift in thinking and action away from waste management in a linear economy—where waste is considered unavoidable and churned out in significant volumes—to waste prevention and whole-systems resource management in a circular economy. Regenerative by design, a circular economy is a systems solution to waste—avoiding the end-of-life impact of waste production and management by eliminating waste in the first place. This shift holds significant potential for improving business competitiveness, innovation, job creation and economic development.

## THE COST OF WASTE

**“Waste is expensive to manage, increases demand on natural resources and is a missed opportunity to extract more value from materials” —CANADIAN COUNCIL FOR MINISTERS OF THE ENVIRONMENT, 2014**

**The Cost to Citizens and Communities:** Every year, local governments in Canada spend approximately \$3.2 billion managing 34 million tonnes of waste. Local governments do their best to reduce negative impacts by managing waste through activities like recycling, composting, waste-to-energy, and capturing landfill gas. But reducing the amount of waste that needs to be managed will relieve the pressure on infrastructure, and the financial burden of managing

that waste on communities and taxpayers. Without action, managing ever-increasing volumes of waste from a growing population will strain management systems, hastening the need for increasing public investments.

**The Cost to Business:** Waste affects the bottom line, cutting into business profits and revenues, and eroding their ability to remain competitive in the global economy. It is getting harder for businesses to source relatively cheap and abundant materials and resources—an approach that has underpinned our traditional linear economy for decades. Amidst concerns about future resource scarcity, businesses have found themselves—and their resource investments—vulnerable to commodity price volatility. Add to this growing consumer, employee and investor demands for accountability and corporate sustainability and it becomes clear why businesses are starting to address waste across their operations.

## A POLITICAL PRIORITY

**Waste is an entry point to sustainable development and helps Canada meet its global commitments**

Waste impacts almost all aspects of the economy and environment with linkages to other global challenges (e.g., sustainable consumption, climate change, poverty, food security), which are often difficult to tackle on their own, but that would benefit from concerted waste prevention efforts.

Preventing waste supports progress towards Canada’s global goals and commitments, including directly supporting many United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Waste prevention potentially reduces global greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 15–30 % (UNEP, 2015). Addressing the problem at source, through upstream initiatives, results in much greater carbon savings.

Preventing waste, and shifting to a circular economy, is an opportunity for governments in Canada to support job creation, economic development, investment, innovation as well as environmental protection, with benefits to citizens and communities.

## A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

### Waste prevention positions Canadian businesses to compete in a resource constrained world

Reducing waste generation through circular and resource efficient approaches represents a huge opportunity for businesses to create a competitive advantage. Many reports have begun to quantify the business benefits of reduced resource consumption, improved resource efficiency, and reduced costs of waste management (UNEP, 2015)—including the **NZWC's case studies**. Business benefits include:

- Cost savings and profit generation
- Enhanced brand and reputation
- Greater customer acquisition and enhanced loyalty
- First mover advantage in terms of developing new business opportunities
- Security of supply and improved access to resource inputs
- Less exposure to commodity price volatility; reduction in virgin resource requirements

It also opens up new business opportunities, as ideas for extracting more value are realized, trialed and scaled up across sectors—generating new economic activity. The circular economy keeps products, components and materials at their highest utility and value, at all times by:

- Preventing waste through new and innovative business models, or through improved design—either for disassembly or for longevity;
- Maximizing the continuation of a product's life through enhanced re-use, repair or remanufacture; and
- Improving end of life processing and resource recovery.

### FIND OUT MORE:

- **Global Waste Management Outlook, United Nations Environment Program and International Solid Waste Association, 2015**
- **State of Waste Management in Canada, Canadian Council of Ministers of Environment, 2014**
- **How Canada Performs, Municipal Solid Waste, Conference Board of Canada, 2013**
- **Waste to Wealth, The Circular Economy Advantage, Peter Lacy and Jakob Rutqvist, 2015**

The **National Zero Waste Council** brings together leaders in government, business and community organizations to advance waste prevention in Canada.